THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Genuine Article
October 3, 1999

John M. Buchanan

"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen

Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi
(1181-1226)

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

THE GENUINE ARTICLE

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
October 3, 1999
Romans 12: 9-21

"Let love be genuine; . . ."
Romans 12:9

Dear God, men and women will come to table today from east and west, north and south, from every race and nationality. So, in your love make us one. And in this symbol of our unity, may we know and be startled by the truth—that we are one family, brothers and sisters of all your children, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Pee Wee Reese died last month. He was 81 years old and his passing warranted a full six columns in the New York Times along with a picture of Reese and two colleagues, dressed for work, Jackie Robinson and Preacher Roe. Pee Wee Reese was a baseball player, and I do apologize to those of you who have not yet connected the game of baseball with spirituality, religion and God, and who persist in saying things like, "It's just a game, for crying out loud!" and "It's not a metaphor for my life!"

I cannot help myself. Pee Wee died in the middle of August on the day I was reading a little theology—a small book by Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, recently retired from McGill University, author of 17 books, and one of the very distinguished Christian scholars of our time. Hall will preach here in January, and he does not, as far as I know, play baseball. But he writes good (I'm tempted to say Big League) theology and in the book I was reading, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity,* he argues that at the end of the millennium, North American people are engaged in four quests: the quest for meaning, community, transcendence, and the quest for authenticity, and that the Christianity that will be faithful and will communicate good news in the future will respond to those four human yearnings: meaning, community, transcendence and authenticity. (p. 57)

I read that, underlined it, made note of it, and then read in the paper that Pee Wee Reese had died, and concluded Pee Wee Reese was authentic, the real thing, or to put it in the vernacular, "the genuine article,"—a person or object that does not pose, posture or pretend to be something he/she/it is not; a person or thing with integrity; no pretense, no attempt to be anything other than what he/she/it essentially is—a good Chicago hot dog, a violin solo, a Sammy Sosa home run, a police officer on duty on a bitter cold night, a nurse at the bedside of a dying patient—the genuine article.

I never liked Pee Wee Reese—the team for which he played during the 40's and 50's became the best in the National League—the Brooklyn Dodgers—and they regularly beat the team I loved, the Pittsburgh Pirates, who in those days rivaled the Cubs in pathos and tragedy and futility and suffering. The Pirates of the 40's and 50's actually prepared me for my vocation as a Cubs fan later in life—although let it be said that, unlike the locals,

Pittsburgh did field superb teams and won several World Series. Reese was a great player, year in and year out, the Dodger's captain, the heart of the team. But he's in this sermon because of something he did at a critical time in American history. No African American had ever played major league baseball. In 1947, the Dodgers brought Jackie Robinson to Brooklyn and the reaction in the country and in baseball itself was immediate and negative.

Reese, the captain of the team, was a Southerner. Another Southerner on that team, Dixie Walker, circulated a petition among the players protesting Robinson's presence in the field and in the club house. Reese refused to sign.

Everywhere the Dodgers went, fans and opposing teams booed and shouted insults at Robinson. Early in the season the Dodgers were in Boston to play the Braves. The Braves players started to heckle Reese for being a Southerner and playing beside a black man. Reese didn't answer or even look at them. Instead, he walked over to Robinson and put his arm around his shoulder and began to talk to him.

Robinson later said it was the gesture that changed everything. Pee Wee Reese was the genuine article.

"Let love be genuine," St. Paul wrote to the early Christians in Rome. "Hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good, love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor . . . be ardent, serve the Lord, rejoice, be patient . . . contribute . . . extend hospitality . . .." Be genuine.

That's an interesting list of exhortations because Paul, in the first eleven chapters, has been telling the Roman Christians that there was nothing they could do to earn their own salvation, no good deeds nor good works they could perform that would persuade God to love them. That had already happened. In Jesus Christ, God has already given the gift of love and salvation. It is a gift. We are saved by grace.

It is Paul's major point. The old Law of Moses was given to Israel as a way to live gratefully, in response to God's grace and love. The law was a way of saying "thank you" to God. But over the years, obeying the law came to be an end in itself, a way to achieve one's salvation or righteousness, and once you've turned that particular corner, the law becomes a powerful instrument for dividing people into righteous and sinful, clean and unclean, holy and unholy. Paul's message was simple and consistent—we are saved, not by the law, not by any law, but by God's grace.

His opponents accused him of moral laxity. If you don't have to be good, why would anybody try to be good? If the law's purpose is not to prevent sin and punish it when it happens, why, anything goes—moral anarchy! And Paul responded that grace is not cheap; the life of faith is not easy. In gratitude for what God has done, people respond in obedient faith, genuine love, lives created anew, shaped and formed by grace.

In his famous commentary on Romans, Karl Barth called these admonitions "the great disturbance." Barth, too, taught that Christianity is essentially about grace, but that human religion always seems to forget that truth and starts attaching conditions—God

will love you if you do such and such; God will save you if you avoid doing this and that. Salvation, Barth taught, is a gift.

But it is not cheap. It cost God the life of God's only son. To know that, Barth understood, is to give your own life away in joyful gratitude. It is to live in a whole new way, not to persuade God to love you, but precisely because you know and experience God's love in Jesus Christ.

Christian ethics, for Barth—and for Paul—are positive ethics; not so much the moralistic prohibitions that we ordinarily associate with religion—don't do this, avoid that—but do love, be patient, practice hospitality.

It is our choice, Barth taught. "We may choose love over hatred" Barth said. (*The Epistle to the Romans,* p.451)

In an article on hate crimes in the New York Times magazine, Andrew Sullivan makes the sociological and anthropological argument that nothing is more normal, or genuine, for human beings than hatred. He writes:

> "At some point in our evolution, being able to know beforehand who was friend or foe was not merely a convenience, but a matter of survival. And even today it seems impossible to feel a loyalty without also feeling a disloyalty, a sense of belonging without an equal sense of unbelonging. We're social beings. We associate. Therefore we disassociate. And although it would be comforting to think that one could happen without the other, we know in reality that it doesn't." (9/26/99)

Well, that's exactly the point. You don't have to hate. The whole point is that God's grace can and does transform human nature, and every now and then, by God's grace, love is genuine.

In his book, *The God We Never Knew,* Marcus Borg says that the popular, traditional Christianity of his childhood has ceased to be intellectually compelling for modern America. That traditional religion was, he says, "doctrinal, moralistic, literalistic, exclusivistic, and oriented toward an afterlife." (p.2)

Americans are bored by that kind of religion that invests its energy in excluding those with whom it disagrees: spending its resources on its own moral purity and in the process declaring 'holy war' on those it considers unclean, or unorthodox.

The God he never knew, Borg says, is more than that and expects more than that. The God he never knew but now trusts profoundly, has a dream, an ambitious dream of a different world than the one that is, an alternative world which keeps breaking in marvelously—a world in which social and political transformation happens, a world where love is genuine, where faithful people actually do choose love instead of hatred, inclusivity instead of exclusivity, grace instead of the law, justice instead of injustice.

God's dream, Borg says, can be glimpsed in lovely Biblical images:

Micah:

> "They will all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid . . ." (Micah 4:4)

Isaiah:

> "They will beat their swords into plowshares,
> and their spears into pruning hooks;
> nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
> neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2:4)

Amos:

> " . . .the mountains shall drip sweet wine and all the hills shall flow with it. . ." (Amos 9:13)

God's dream is a world, or a people in the world who know about God's love and are transformed by it and give their lives to the godly work of compassion, justice and genuine love.

Sometimes we are privileged to see that world breaking in. Sometimes we are privileged to see, in a moment, an encounter, a man on a baseball field putting his arm around another man, a gesture of generosity, an act of courage, a deed of hope, the genuine article—God's love at work in the world.

Will Campbell is a Southern Baptist preacher, author, satirist, whose mission in life is to deflate the pompous and hypocritical and celebrate the genuine and true and authentic, and to point to the breaking in of God's kingdom of love and hope.

In a wonderful new book of anecdotes from his own life and ministry, he describes ways God's love shows up in unlikely places. One brief essay is about hope:

> "Two years ago our nearest neighbors, a couple from what is called the blue-collar class, experienced a grim tragedy. Their teenage grandson was murdered by his mother, who also killed herself. This past Christmas Eve, when the grandmother entered the cemetery for her weekly pilgrimage, she saw a young black male standing near the grandson's tomb. She did not recognize him. His dress and bearing would have frightened some, suggesting to them felonious intent. He held something in his hand and moved toward the woman as she approached. What he held was not an Uzi, not a Saturday night special, not a knife. It was a long-stemmed rose, shimmering in the winter's chilly mist. With a smiling greeting, he offered her the rose, and together they leaned down and placed in on the grave. 'I come here often,' he said. 'Matt was my best friend at school.'

> An elderly white woman of the yeomanry and a young black man of the urban poor, in solemn accord in a country graveyard. Mourning, loving, remembering. Together. Perplexed, but not despairing.
>
> We shall overcome? Only in ways like that." (Will D. Campbell, *Soul Among Lions,* p. 1-2)

Jesus sat at table with his friends on the night of his arrest. He broke bread for them, and poured wine and shared it with them. And then he did the most astonishing thing. For the love of God he went out and laid down his life—the genuine article. Do this in remembrance of me, he said, which surely means in remembrance of that—that genuine love, the possibility that genuine love will transform you, the real possibility that your own love will become genuine too.

Throughout the world today, in every nation, every city, every village, Christian people are coming to the table of our Lord to remember: Bob and Dalia Baker in Tirana, Albania, Jack and Joy Houston in Guatemala, friends in Edinburgh, Iona, Corrymeela, Belfast; brothers and sisters in Bejing, Moscow, Seoul, San Paulo, Havana, Ocijek, Zagreb—to show the world—and themselves, something of God's dream of authentic love.

Wendell Berry, poet, writes about his beloved Kentucky woods, on a Sabbath morning in a way that invites us to table today, World Communion Sunday.

> "Let us meet here together,
> Members one of another,
> Here in our holy room . . .
> One household, high and low
> And all the earth shall sing . . ."
> (*A Timbered Choir,* p.52)

Let your love be genuine.

Amen.